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MEMORANDUM

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NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

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MORI/CDF per C03343636

URGENT INFORMATION
November 15, 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR SECRETARY KISSINGER

FROM: W.R. Smyser 

SUBJECT: Your Next Meeting with Le Duc Tho

I assume Le Duc Tho will agree to meet with you in the near future, as you suggested.

Though I cannot claim full familiarity with your exchanges during my absence, I have a few thoughts that you may want to review before we send you a formal options paper from Stearman once a date is fixed.

The Prospects of a North Vietnamese Offensive

I find it difficult to agree with those participants in the recent NIE who believe that the North Vietnamese will not launch a major offensive during this dry season. There are now almost 300,000 communist troops in South Vietnam. More than two-thirds of these are North Vietnamese. More are coming every week. It makes no sense for Hanoi to put this many troops into South Vietnam if they are not going to be used very soon to expand Viet Cong areas of control, to try to bring down the GVN, and to improve the "PRG" position in political talks. Hanoi has too many needs at home to send its young men to dawdle in the South.

I think we will certainly be subject to a major offensive. In the old days the North Vietnamese always had to resolve the fundamental dilemma between low-scale actions that got them nowhere and high-scale actions that invited heavy American retaliation. The American Congress has solved this for them. They also now have little incentive to wait for an American election year. In fact, they may believe that we would be more prepared to see Thieu go down now than in an election year.

I regard Tho's desire to see you as a confirmation of this intent. They always like to talk while they are fighting. Even more, they like to listen.

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You can take your choice as to the type of offensive and as to the areas of concentration. Bill Stearman thinks they need rice, which points to an offensive in the southern delta and in III Corps as well as in I Corps. The rice drive would precede a major offensive, since they will need the food for fighting, and would take place mainly in December. I think they would also like to take Hue, for all the obvious reasons. It is academic whether they will attack all at once, as they did in 1968 and 1972, or whether they will conduct the kind of rolling offensive that came near to destroying the South Vietnamese forces in 1964 and 1965. They would almost certainly choose the latter if our domestic situation were better. Even now they may still prefer it.

Bill Stearman is sending you a separate memorandum to get the bureaucracy ready for what will happen. It would be nice if we had some preparation.

Le Duc Tho's Objectives

I do not think Le Duc Tho will have anything stimulating to say about Cambodia or Vietnam until the dry season has gone by or at least until he can make some decent estimate of where his forces stand. However, he wants very much to hear what you have to say. If Hanoi does not control the Cambodian communists (as some CIA people believe), it can certainly increase its influence by demonstrating that it can use this channel either to offer them a diplomatic refuge or to legalize and confirm a victory. Since the Cambodian communists have no access to you (unless there is a file I have not read), this gives the North Vietnamese some leverage. If Hanoi's control of the Cambodian movement is greater than CIA believes, it wants the channel with you for all the reasons for which it was used in handling Vietnam.

Le Duc Tho's relationship with you has, however, advanced too far for him to play obviously transparent games. Although we have seen no evidence that Hanoi's position on Cambodia has matured since your last round, I assume Tho has to say something even though he cannot give anything away in the areas that you find interesting (ceasefire and a real political settlement).

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He may talk about such subjects of direct mutual concern as a pull-out of forces after a settlement, or he may reiterate some variation of the non-interference pledge that he offered you last Spring. His imagination in devising this kind of material in areas that he does not want to negotiate is so great that I hesitate to make specific predictions.

On Vietnam, I imagine he will try to talk about economic "normalization" (aid) and he may try to see if he can use us to put some pressure on Thieu before or during an offensive. I see little prospect that he will now give us anything very real.

What Can We Gain?

We obviously want to slow down and perhaps forestall an offensive, but our bluff is not as good as it used to be while their imperatives are more urgent. I am not sure that we can make a very deep impression, but we obviously must try. We must say things that will open a few doubts in his mind, and that will also make clear that we will give Thieu all the material help he needs.

There are some things we can say that will give little away and that might position us for a decent chance to get something from the Congress, or if we need to go public. We can talk about ceasefire consolidation, about elections, and about improvement of the control mechanism. We can build a record that we have done our best to try for genuine peace and it is Hanoi who has blocked it. I agree with Peter Rodman that we should also see if the GVN can make some helpful contribution.

This is not much to work with, but it could sustain us while we see if skeptical estimates of Tho's intention are wrong.

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